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Pragmatism, realism and moralism

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Abstract

Pragmatism is often seen as an unpolitical doctrine. This article argues that it is shares important commitments with realist political theory, which stresses the distinctive character of the political and the difficulty of viewing political theory simply as applied ethics, and that many of its key arguments support realism. Having outlined the elective affinities between realism and pragmatism, this paper goes on to consider this relationship by looking at two recent elaborations of a pragmatist argument in contemporary political theory, which pull in different directions, depending on the use to which a pragmatist account of doxastic commitments is put. In one version, the argument finds in these commitments a set of pre-political principles, of the sort that realists reject. In the other version, the account given of these commitments more closely tracks the concerns of realists and tries to dispense with the need for knowledge of such principles.

I.

The political seems to be difficult terrain for pragmatists. The most prominent pragmatist social and political theorist, John Dewey, forcefully presses an avowedly unpolitical conception of democracy, as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience", "the idea of community life itself", or a "*personal* way of individual life" (e.g., Dewey 1916: 93; Dewey 1927: 328; Dewey 1939: 226). Pragmatism is often thought to view politics as primarily a matter of collective problem-solving, glossing over core political phenomena such as power and conflict which subvert the hopes for such a shared enterprise.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship of pragmatism to the "realist' current in recent political theory which has sought to emphasise the specifically political character of political theorising. The recent interest in realism in political theory seeks to trace the distinctive contours of politics as a dimension of human activity and to overturn what it identifies as the moralistic tendencies in political philosophy.[1] The paper begins by offering an overview of key realist themes and the overlap between these themes and pragmatist commitments. With this basic position blocked out, the paper goes on to explore two contrasting recent versions of a pragmatist political argument, developed by Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse, on the one hand, and by Thomas Fossen, on the other. These pull in different directions, I will suggest, depending on the account they offer of practical doxastic commitments and the implications that they draw from this. In the first version, the argument finds in these commitments a set of pre-political principles, of the

[1] For a guide to the state of play, see Rossi and Sleat 2014. Overviews and influential statements are discussed below but include Bell 2008; Freeden 2005; Galston 2010; Geuss 2008; Mouffe 2005; Newey 2001; Williams 2005.

sort that realists reject. In the other version, the account given of these commitments tries to dispense with the need for knowledge of such principles.

It should be noted that pragmatism and realism are both constituted by an undisciplined rabble of doctrines, temperaments and sensibilities: there is no scope to do justice to this variety and I will impose some artificial tidiness on each position. Further, this is not a study in influence or "genealogy". For some realists, pragmatists are indeed an interesting reference point or source of inspiration: Raymond Geuss (2001) and Chantal Mouffe (2001) for example are directly responsive to authors usually classified as pragmatist. For others, notably Williams in much of his later work, Richard Rorty in particular serves as a foil and a goad: however far Williams was going, it was not *that* far, or in that direction (Williams 2002, 2005). However, nothing in the following discussion hangs on establishing paths of influence.[2]

II.

The realist's primary commitment is to viewing political theory as a distinct enterprise, and politics as a particular practice constituted by a distinctive set of concerns. In particular, realists are skeptical about governing politics with reference to antecedent moral principles. We should not view political theory as applied ethics, for which "'[p]ure" ethics as an ideal theory comes first, then applied ethics, and politics is a kind of applied ethics" (Geuss 2008: 9; cf. Williams 2005: 2). From this perspective, the key danger in

[2] Further, Ian Hacking suggests in an engaging intellectual self-portrait that one can subscribe to a bundle of pragmatist commitments while resisting the invitation to self-identify as a pragmatist or even as inspired by pragmatists (Hacking 2007; cf. Quine 1981). Misak (2013) makes an ambitious and scholarly case for the prevalence of pragmatism among analytic philosophers even during the period of its alleged "eclipse".

contemporary political thought is to collapse the distinctive normativity of political thinking into political *moralism*, confusing politics and morality. Moralism embodies a kind of reductionist view of political thinking, which fails to acknowledge the distinctiveness or autonomy of political thinking by viewing it only as moral theory applied to a particular subject matter.[3] Political moralism, in Williams's account, characteristically takes one of two forms. Enactment models formulate a particular set of moral principles and values which then require implementation through political institutions and the use of power, as with utilitarianism, on Williams's view. [4] Structural models pick out a set of moral constraints on institutions and power, as in the kind of Kantian approach Williams finds in Rawls's political liberalism, which rests political legitimacy only on principles all can accept. There are at least two distinguishable versions of this claim for the autonomy of the political. In its categorical form, it is the claim that guidance in politics is only possible by *sui generis* political values and standards, and other types of value (ethical, religious, aesthetic, etc.) may play no legitimate role: this is the "hard-edged" realism identified with some classical IR and *Realpolitik*. So if we view material self-interest and power as all that matter for politics, for instance, other candidates for guiding political action should fall

[3] The term "moralism" is used in other ways, of course, including by realists: see Ivison (2005), Geuss (2010: 31-42).

[4] Cf. Dunn (1989: 214) on the "the presumption, as compulsively attractive to modern political moralists like Lenin or Mao or Hayek or the paladins of social democracy as it was to Plato or Cardinal Richelieu, that the solution to the problems of politics is to concentrate power in just the right hands or at the service of just the right values". There is unfortunately not the space to consider the rather different conception of political moralism from the more constricted use in the very recent literature.

away as irrelevant intrusions.[5] The onus then falls on the hard-edged realist to give an argument to the effect that we know a priori that all moral, legal, ethical, etc., considerations can, or should, be excluded from properly political thinking.

The realists who concern us here endorse a weaker form of the realist claim for the autonomy of the political, to the effect that politically realistic thinking should give 'a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (Williams 2005: 3; cf. Geuss 2008: 99; Philp 2012: 634). While power, conflict and disagreement for realists form the "circumstances of politics" (Waldron 1999: 102-8; Weale 1999: 8-13; cf. Geuss 2008: 25-8; Williams 2005: 5-6, 59-60; Mouffe 2000; Newey 2001; Galston 2010), they usually seek to distinguish political relationships from relations of mere domination, violence or terror (Williams (2005: 5; cf. Mouffe 2005). What is crucial is that moral and political considerations should not be confused. In a well-known example of Williams's, judging humanitarian intervention on the model of individual rescue misses what is distinctively political about this kind of decision: for example, that it involves a powerful actor, such as a powerful state or coalition of states identifying itself as the salient rescuer, that "imperial assistance" brings with it "imperial control", that interventions need to be democratically legitimated, that decisions to intervene are not decisions to intervene personally but to deploy others to do so, and that they have long-run domestic and international political consequences (Williams 2005: 145-53; cf. Dunn 1995:136-47). In this case, acknowledging the autonomy of the political involves attentiveness to a diverse and contextually variable range of considerations specific to the political dilemma that viewing intervention specifically on the model of individual rescue tends to miss.

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[5] Of course, there is a complex intellectual historiography here. In relation to the current crop of realists in political theory, see Geuss 2010: 38-9, Scheuerman 2013, Sleat 2014.

The second commitment is to the primacy of practice, encapsulated in Williams's adoption of Goethe's phrase (famously used by Wittgenstein) "In the beginning was the deed" (Williams 2005: 14-15, 24-8). Answering the demand for legitimation is a matter of providing a response in particular historical circumstances, not of arriving at a solution in the state of nature before handing off this solution for implementation (Williams 2005: 3, 29-39, 62, 65-7; Geuss 2008: 8, 16-7, 24-5). In part, as Marc Stears and Bonnie Honig point out, awareness of practical and historical contingency acts as a prophylactic against the "subversion of the wish", a reminder of the contingent origins, uncontrollable consequences and uncertain prospects of political values (Honig and Stears 2011: 186; Williams 2002: 153). However, it is important that for realists this anti-foundational stance does not pull the rug out from under the possibility of critical thinking about existing practices and standards but rather provides a condition for this criticism. "What we are left with, if we reject foundationalism', Williams writes, 'is not an inactive or functionalist conservatism that has to take ethical ideas as they stand" (Williams 2005: 37). Rather, making non-foundationalist ethical thought 'historically and socially realistic' creates 'a possibility of deploying some parts of it against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers' (Williams 2005: 37; Philp 2010: 477). Indeed, one of the features of politics in modern societies is self-consciousness of the historically constituted character of their values and institutions. One of the flaws of political moralism, by contrast, is its tendency to seek to flatten this historical awareness. Williams famously decries a "universalistic tendency which encourages it to inform past societies about their failings" – playing Kant at the court of King Arthur (Williams 2005: 10, 66).

Third, realists identify a particular ideological aspect to moralism's flattening of history and contingency, since it encourages "generalizing one's own local prejudices and

repackaging them as demands of reason" and distracts from attention to the particular power structures of particular societies (Geuss 2005: 39, 52-5; Rossi and Sleat 2015: 4-5; Dunn 1990; Humphrey 2012).

Finally, the emphasis on the primacy of practice and the rejection of moral theory as the source of antecedent standards lead to a focus on political judgement and agency in specific contexts, "the distinctive contribution that can be made by the agency of particular individuals within causal constraints, given their skills, professionalism and vocation, and the costs of various options" (Philp 2010: 478). This concern includes, and is often expressed as, a Weberian preoccupation with the ethics and pathos of leadership and executive decision, but it is hardly exhausted by this focus. In the absence of a "categorically more reassuring and splendid form of collective life, lurking just over the brow of the hill (or in the sybilline pages of Karl Marx or Kropotkin or John Rawls or Hayek or Schumacher)", for instance, John Dunn suggests the "democratization of prudence" (Dunn 1989: 212-4). However wide we cast the net of political agency, the underlying point is that responsibility for judgement falls on the shoulders of particular agents exercising their capacities to identify and solve problems as best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Interpreted in this way, the realist shares some important similarities with the pragmatist. Pragmatism endorses the realist's doubts about antecedent a priori criteria for assessing success in inquiry and action; instead appropriate criteria are hammered out through practice, experience and social learning. In his ethical writings, Dewey elaborates a view of moral theory not as an antecedent constraint on action but rather as a repertoire of conceptual resources and tools for dealing with the problems of value judgement in a

world of plural and changing values. [6] In *Ethics*, Dewey and Tufts offer an interpretation of different canonical value theories, teleology, deontology and virtue ethics as providing contrasting methodological orientations for identifying, describing and solving problems. Instead of asking which of these approaches best captures "our intuitions" and so should be used as an unvarying standard to guide decision-making in concrete situations, Dewey argues that no one approach constitutes an theoretically adequate guide to how to act in particular situations. Instead, these provide standpoints from which agents can identify and analyze problems, sift important from unimportant considerations, and appraise our raw preferences ("prizings") and alternative plans of action. Conflict among these approaches cannot be resolved in theory – only in practice, if at all, where an agent must make "the best adjustment he can among forces which are genuinely disparate" (Dewey 1930: 288; Dewey 1920: 173-4; Dewey 1930b; Dewey 1932: 166).

Second, pragmatists share the realists' methodological commitment to the primacy of practice (cf. Putnam 1995: 52). This is so, first, in that at the core of Deweyan pragmatism is a conception of beliefs and judgements as tools or instruments for resolving problematic situations. Inquiry is a problem-solving activity, engaged in by particular agents: agitated by some doubt, finding ourselves, in Dewey's terms, in an "indeterminate situation", we respond with inquiry in order to arrive at beliefs and policies of action that can assuage these doubts. Pragmatists also embrace the historical character of belief and value. Moral theories are seen as historical products, expressing and embodying the societies that produce and sustain them, on this view. We can only begin to reason and deliberate on the basis of the beliefs and practices that we have – we cannot call everything into question all at once. The pragmatist views beliefs both as rooted in history,

[6] See Welchman 1995, Festenstein 1997, Pappas 2009, Bohman 2010, Fesmire 2003, 2014.

and as subject to rational scrutiny. The criteria for what counts as success or failure in inquiry are not pre-given and external to inquiry, but are hammered out through it: "what we have are practices which are right are wrong, depending on how they square with our standards. And our standards are right or wrong depending on how they square with our practices. This is a circle or, better, a spiral" – but a virtuous one (Putnam 1990: 304). For the pragmatist, there is no epistemologically privileged standpoint from which to assess either practices or standards. Finally, recognition of the historical character of our conceptual resources does not mean we must cleave to *Sittlichkeit*. Dewey's extensive writings on liberalism stress the historical sources of notions of the individual, rights, freedom, contract, and so on. In part, the point in each case is to explain how theories that emerged and were fitted for one particular social context fail to make sense in a different context.[7] Ensnared by redundant moral notions, we can fail to perceive and respond to the distinctive needs of the present.

Third, Deweyan pragmatism also shares the realist's commitment to unmasking what Dewey saw as the pernicious effects of repackaging historically embodied moral conceptions as universal truths. To take a crucial instance which does seem to have had some impact on Geuss, Dewey maintains that a strong distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value, as more than an analytical distinction drawn by a particular agent in a particular situation, both reflects and reinforces a wider societal division between a leisured and a labouring class (cf. Dewey 1922: 160, 185-8; Dewey 1939: 235; Dewey 1948: 275; Geuss 2001: 124-7; Geuss 2005: 119).

Fourth, as we have seen, Deweyan pragmatism throws the stress on contextual individual judgment, rather than antecedent theory, as the locus of decision-making. In the political realm, pragmatists argue that experimental social inquiry takes the place of a priori

[7] Dewey 1920, 1930a, 1935; Festenstein 1995, 1997; Westbrook 1991; Ryan 1995.

moral theory as the basis of social and political decision-making.[8] Social and political values are notoriously treated not as fixed standards but as revisable hypotheses, the implications of which are worked through in practice and which are judged in the light of their consequences in the widest sense for everyone involved. Democracy is understood as consisting in and as providing the conditions for this ongoing experimental inquiry. It consists in this inquiry in the sense that democracy is constituted by consultation, debate, and challenge among all citizens, testing out the policies, values and ways of life. Robust inquiry requires that we must have access to evidence, arguments, other forms of information, and processes of reason-exchange. And democracy provides the institutional conditions for this inquiry, through institutionalizing "effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication" as well as ways of holding rulers to account and of informing them of their mistakes (Dewey 1939: 227; Dewey 1927: 290-3, 364-6).

III.

One way of developing the pragmatist view of democracy as inquiry is as an account of antecedent *epistemological* constraints on the political, grounded not in a moral theory but in the pragmatist conception of inquiry.

This has been the thrust of the Peircean line of argument pursued by Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse. The pragmatist conception of inquiry, this line of argument runs, tells us what we are committed to if we want true beliefs: in Misak's pithy formulation, "the requirements of genuine belief show that we must, broadly speaking, be democratic

[8] E.g., Anderson 2006; Bohman 1999; Festenstein 1997, Festenstein 2001, Festenstein 2007, Festenstein 2008, Festenstein 2010a; Kaufman-Osborn 1991; Knight and Johnson 1999; Knight and Johnson 2011; Putnam 1994: 198-220; Westbrook 2005: 175-200. Some other important work is cited below.

inquirers" (Misak, 2000: 106).[9] So, at least where we experience doubt, the search for a well-grounded belief involves testing claims against as wide a range of different experiences as possible, rendering our beliefs responsive to reasons and evidence. In particular, it requires us to seek out and attend to different perspectives and arguments, in order to test and, if necessary, revise our current conceptions: the search for "truth requires us to listen to others and anyone might be an expert" (Misak 2000: 96). In this interpretation, our deeper shared commitment to arriving at and sustaining true beliefs is a value that needs to be implemented in and through politics, and shapes political order. No matter what particular political views we embrace, we nevertheless share, and should recognize that we share, a commitment to arriving at true beliefs. This shared commitment means that adherents to dogma and tradition should reject the methods they have relied on to fix their beliefs and instead embrace pragmatist democracy:

> [T]hose who would turn their backs on democracy in favor of an autocracy, in favor of a religious hierarchy, or in favor of a might-makes-right regime, are failing to see that they betray their own practices of arguing, asserting and defending their views, big and small. For as soon as one engages in the practice of giving and asking for reasons, one manifests one's commitment to the assessment of reasons and to the considering of reasons, whether they come from a powerless group, from the religiously misguided, or from the despised. One also manifests one's commitment

[9] See Misak 2000, 2004, 2009; 2007, 2010, 2011, 2014; Misak and Talisse 2014; Talisse 2007, 2011a, 2011b, 2014. For analysis, see Bacon 2010; Festenstein 2004, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; MacGilvray 2013. Talisse interprets this argument as an epistemological variant of Rawlsian political liberalism, which offers a different conception of the distinctness of the political from the realist's: I discuss the issues raised by this interpretation in Festenstein 2010a.

> to preserving a social-epistemic environment within which reliable assessments of this kind can be made (Misak and Talisse 2014: 10-11)

Authoritarians betray their own cognitive commitments, according to this line of thought.

Positing a shared commitment to a common theory of knowledge which structures political thinking is just as counter-political as a recognized and shared commitment to a common moral theory which structures political thinking. A pragmatist may claim exemption from the realist critique on the grounds that, unlike moralism, this argument makes only a relatively uncontentious epistemological claim not a controversial moral assumption of the sort that provokes realist criticism. After all, we may think, no matter what the content of our beliefs, we all desire them to be true. However, for the realist, this seems susceptible to the objection directed at moralism (cf. Williams 2005: 16).

For this epistemological pragmatist argument to have any bite in relation to autocrats, religious hierarchs, or proponents of might makes right, it needs not only to show what follows from subscribing to pragmatism but what follows for them, given their other practical commitments. The authoritarian must be confronted with a practical dilemma, as well as a reason to choose in a particular way: either to betray her particular conception of social order or vision of the good life (and perhaps also her own interests and those of her clique) or to betray her doxastic commitments, as outlined by the pragmatist. While this pragmatist argument (if the authoritarian is carried along by it) offers a reason for the authoritarian to think that this is a dilemma, it does not tell her why she has to grasp one horn rather than another, why the considerations thrown up by the pragmatist argument should have practical priority.

The pragmatist can respond that it is enough to show that the authoritarian is in a state of epistemic disorder, failing to act on the doxastic commitments she ought to recognize (cf. Talisse 2010). Yet this response seems to instance exactly what realists

worry about in political moralism, the abstraction of a particular epistemological consideration, which is then given priority over other political considerations. The pragmatist may also make the very forceful point that over time such a regime is cognitively unstable, poorly equipped to arrive at and sustain well-grounded beliefs on the basis of which to act. Of course rulers may still promote other values (security, development) above cognitive stability, and in particular instances it is an empirical question whether the trade-off is justified. And rulers (like some of the rest of us) may in any case operate on a blend of Keynes's maxim (that in the long run we're all dead) and Micawber's (that something will turn up), one or both of which is invariably valid (cf. Geuss 2008: 3). Now saying that this conception of inquiry is itself politically contentious is neither to claim that there is an alternative which will do the job or providing a reason for the authoritarian to dismantle her regime nor to say that "anything goes". It is only to say that it is embedded within the realm of political controversy. Lots of well-grounded (indeed, true) beliefs are politically contentious – that is, they cannot be assumed to form part of a commonly accepted framework within which politics is conducted.

IV.

The other version of this pragmatic turn that I want to focus on also takes its starting point from the idea that we incur non-discretionary commitments in our practices of believing, claiming, asserting and declaring things. In what Thomas Fossen (2011: 391) calls, a trifle inelegantly, "systematic agonistic social pragmatism", he aims to develop an alternative to normativism – a version of moralism as outlined here (cf. Fossen 2014: 232; 2012: 431). For normativism, the main task for political philosophy (concerning legitimacy) is to formulate and justify principles and criteria that specify the conditions of legitimacy. This constitute "a kind of knowledge that can subsequently be applied in actual situations in

which the legitimacy of political authority is questioned" and allows us to "determine whether a claim to legitimacy is correct with reference to those principles" (Fossen 2012: 430-1).

Fossen sketches a different image of norms, drawing on Robert Brandom's imposing architectonic of "the implicit structure characteristic of discursive practice as such" (Brandom 1994: 374, Brandom 2000, Brandom 2002). Norms arise within practices of giving and asking for reasons, and in accepting reasons and making claims participants bind themselves to standards that go beyond their subjective interpretation of their commitments. What it is for us to think of ourselves and others as normative beings is as capable of undertaking commitments, ascribing them to others and accepting responsibility for them. Calling an authority legitimate or illegitimate is a matter of "taking a stance" in a linguistic practice, attributing various commitments and entitlements to oneself and other participants: it is only "from an engaged standpoint, in virtue of subjects taking stances from different perspectives" that "there such a thing as political legitimacy at all" (Fossen 2012: 442). To take a claim to authority to be legitimate is to accept commitments to obey while to reject it is to accept commitments to treat it as a coercive imposition. These "stances" are not arbitrary: if I claim that the polity is legitimate, I make a further claim that this is more than my opinion. From the perspective of a participant in claim-making, "stances (including one's own) are liable to evaluation, and participants can be held responsible for them" (Fossen 2012: 442). In other words, in engaging in discursive practice we distinguish between the commitments that we happen to accept and those that it is appropriate to accept. Finally, Fossen insists on a dimension of agonal contestation in discursive practice. Just as in the agon what counts as excellence is not fixed in advance but emerges through the contest, in discursive practice "what is true, correct or meaningful is not determined in advance of the practice, or identified with any individual subject's

assessment of it or with that of the community as a whole. Rather, it is a function of the engagement, as assessed from each perspective" (Fossen 2011: 384).

Critics respond that Fossen has not shown that the very idea of an external set of principles by which to judge political legitimacy is either incoherent or unnecessary (Erman and Moller 2014, 2015). Identifying the practice or game as a practice or game does not change the options available to participants within it, they argue: the articulation of moral principles remains a permissible move in practices of justification, until those practices of justification themselves rule them out, and may be a required move if the practices deem it so. Of course, one can seek to change these practices in a realist or anti-normativist direction but that is an activity within the practices, which, like other moves, is thrown into the agonic mixing pot. Further, they argue that it is not clear what difference such an approach makes, normatively speaking. The "claim that legitimacy 'cannot be determined with certainty, definitively or from a disengaged standpoint' fails to prohibit or to suggest any type of normative theory of legitimacy". Accordingly, Fossen's line of argument "is not telling us [sc. normativists] to do anything differently from what we already do" (Erman and Moller 2014: 15). There is nothing that follows from recognizing the pragmatist framework as such that renders appeal to such principles within practices of justification impermissible.

However, we have seen that the characteristic pragmatist move is not skepticism about theories and principles in this sense but to interpret them as tools for deliberation and problem-solving in particular contexts. So this normativist response seems to miss the point of this pragmatist argument. This rejects the idea that having a grasp of the concept of legitimacy *must* take the form of theoretical knowledge of antecedent principles that determine how we evaluate particular contexts and that without this knowledge, there is only arbitrariness. So the question becomes whether or not the normativist can sustain the

account of principle as foundational in this sense, as well as whether or not the pragmatist's inferential account holds water. Of course, this is not the place to offer a definitive resolution of these questions, but this does suggest that the normativist response does not in itself do enough to establish the vacuity of this pragmatist approach.

V.

This paper has aimed to open up and air some lines of inquiry, not to settle them, in this limited space. Pragmatism provides one way to give philosophical articulation to a range of realist commitments, and the debates generated by contemporary pragmatist argument bear directly on the realist's concerns. I want to close by returning to where we started, Dewey's notorious image of democracy as a personal way of life is still clearly at some remove from the picture of politics offered by, say, Williams (although he is a liberal) or Geuss (although he is a radical critic of capitalism). But it is not in itself an image that the realist has to repudiate *qua* realist, and of course Dewey had his own specific theoretical and polemical goals in advancing this conception. The realist's anti-moralist historicism does not in itself provide a determinate picture of the distinctive content and boundaries of the political realm, which is unsurprisingly the topic of contention among realists (cf. Honig and Stears 2014). Viewing realism through the pragmatist lens reminds us that realists cannot help themselves to specific conceptions of the political (as the domain of legitimacy, pathos-laden decision, tragic, conflict-ridden, agonistic, a realm of elite action or democratic deliberation) without awareness that this conception is exposed to contextual and practical trial.

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